Basic Exercises

The Pull Up

The pull up exercise (also called a chin up) is one of the most overlooked exercises for building upper body, back and core strength. It requires a very simple piece of exercise equipment -- a chin up bar. Chin up bars can be elaborate, free-standing pieces of exercise equipment, or simple, doorway chin up bars you purchase online or at a local sporting goods store.

Unfortunately, most athletes ignore this simple exercise during their regular strength training routine. Don't make that same mistake. It's one of the "must do" exercises no matter your fitness level.

The traditional pull up uses an overhand grip on the bar, while the chin up generally uses an underhand grip. Here, we focus on the overhand grip.

How to Do a Pull Up

The pull up bar should be at a height that requires you to jump up to grab it; your feet should hang free.

1. Stand below the bar with your feet shoulder width apart.
2. Jump up and grip the bar with an overhand grip.
3. Bend your knees and cross your ankles for a balanced position.
4. Pull yourself up so your chin is level with the bar.
5. Lower yourself so your elbows are straight.
6. Repeat the movement without touching the floor.

In general, you should move through the entire movement in a somewhat slow and controlled motion.

Complete the number of repetitions your workout requires. Once your form deteriorates, it's time to stop and take a rest or you may risk injury.

But I Can't Do One Pull Up Yet

If you can't do one full pull up yet, there are several ways to build up your strength so you can start doing pull ups.

- **Machine Assisted Pull Up**
  Begin by using a pull up assist machine. You'll have to go to a gym for this, but it's a good ways to start developing the strength required for the pull up.
- **Human Assistance**
  Have a trainer, coach or spotter "assist" you. Keep your knees bent and ankles crossed. Your partner will provide a gentle lift while gripping the tops of your feet. This small assist helps offset your weight as you pull up.
- **Static Pull Ups**
  Use a box or step to lift yourself into the pull up "finish" position and hold your chin at bar level for as long as you can. This will build your upper body strength over time. Slowly transition into the negative pull up exercise (see below) over several weeks.
- **Negative Pull Ups**
  Use a box or step to lift yourself into the pull up "finish" position and hold your chin at bar level for several seconds. Slowly lower yourself in a controlled motion, stopping and holding at several points along the way. When you get to the bottom, repeat the process.
- **Half Pull Ups**
  Stand on a box or bench that allows your elbows to bend about 90 degrees as you grip the bar. Starting your pull up from this position requires far less strength than starting with a fully extended elbows. Complete a few pull ups this way first, then lower the box and straighten your elbows over time for a more difficult pull up.
- **Jumping Pull Ups**
  Stand on a box or bench that allows your elbows to bend slightly as you grip the bar. Bend you knees until your elbows are fully extended, then "jump" up to the pull up "finish" position with your chin level with the bar. Slowly lower yourself back to the box and repeat. Over time, you will gain strength until you can attempt other pull up variations.
- **Lat Pull Down**
  The lat pull down machine is another way to begin building the strength need for the pull up. With this machine, you stay seated with your knees held down and you pull the weight down to you. It's not my first choice for learning how to do the pull up, however, because it's an entirely different body position and angle, but it's a fairly safe way to get started.

The Push Up

The push up may just be the perfect total body exercise that builds both upper body and core strength. Done properly, it is a compound exercise that uses muscles in the chest, shoulders, triceps, back, abs and even the legs.

How to Do a Perfect Push Up

- Get on the floor and position your hands slightly wider than your shoulders.
- Raise up onto your toes so you are balanced on your hands and toes.
- Keep your body in a straight line from head to toe without sagging in the middle or arching your back.
- Your feet can be close together or a bit wider depending upon what is most comfortable for you.
- Before you begin any movement, contract your abs and tighten your core by pulling your belly button toward your spine.
- Keep a tight core throughout the entire push up.
- Inhale as you slowly bend your elbows and lower yourself until your elbows are at a 90 degree angle.
- Exhale as you begin pushing back up to the start position
- Don't lock out the elbows; keep them slightly bent.
- Repeat for as many repetitions as your workout routine requires.

How to Do More Push Ups

You can use a few simple strategies to build your strength and endurance in order to do more push ups. This is useful for those who have to pass a fitness test (such as the Army Physical Fitness Test). It takes time, effort and a systematic approach, but doing more push ups is not impossible.

Push Up Variations

- **Push Up Lat Row**
  The push up is nearly perfect all by itself, but add a couple of dumbbells to the movement and you have a complete upper body workout. This variation adds alternating dumbbell lat rows to the top of each rep. This modification increases the intensity of the exercise, activates the core stabilizers and engages the latissimus dorsi (back) muscles.
- **Stability Ball Push Ups**
  If you are ready to move beyond the basic push and add some core stability work try stability ball push ups. This variation of the push up increases the difficulty and effectiveness of the standard push up. Adding the balance requirement takes some practice an good core strength, so make sure you can do about 20 basic push ups before trying these.
- **Alternating Medicine Ball Push Up**
  This variation adds core stability as well as a modified range of motion during the basic push up movement. Roll the medicine ball between each hand after a reps and add a new balance challenge.
- **Incline Push Ups**
  If a standard push up is too difficult, you can start by doing push ups against a wall, a table or a sturdy chair. Stand several feet away from the object you are using and use the

same push up technique as above to lower yourself until the elbows are 90 degrees and then raise back up. Keep you core tight the whole time.

- **Bent Knee Push Ups**
  This is a modified version of the standard push up performed on the knees rather than on the toes. Be sure to keep the knees, hips and shoulders all in a straight line; most people have a tendency to bend at the hips as though you are bowing, but this is incorrect technique.
- **Decline Push Ups**
  This is a more difficult push up, performed with the feet raised up on a box or bench. You can adjust the box height to increase or decrease the resistance using just your body weight.
- **Clapping Push Up**
  This is a plyometric exercise in which you push yourself up with enough power so that your hands come off the floor and you clap in midair. This exercise is not for novice exercisers. You can get injured very easily if you haven't worked up to these one at a time.
- **Medicine Ball Push Up**
  Perform a standard push up with one hand one top of a medicine ball. This works the shoulder in a slightly different range of motion which increases shoulder stability.
- **Diamond Push Up**
  The diamond push up is done with your hands close together; with the index fingers and thumbs of one hand touching touching the other hand and making a diamond shape. You then do push ups with your hands touching the center of your chest and elbows close to your sides during each rep.

The Barbell Military Press

Performed correctly, the basic barbell military press is an exceptional upper body, trunk and cores strengthening exercise. This movement is unique in its ability to develop the strength, balance and core stabilization of the entire body. During the exercise the body is kept tall and straight throughout the movement.

The lift affects the upper pectoralis, the shoulders, the upper arms and the upper back. The upper pectoralis and upper back help to stabilize the scapula as the movement is

performed. The shoulders, prominently the deltoids, are directly affected by this move, as are the triceps.

Before beginning warm up the shoulders with some arm rotations to the front, sides and rear. After finishing, do a few shoulder specific static stretches. Then cool down.

How to Perform the Military Press

1. Prior to the lift, you must tighten the core.
2. Practice abdominal bracing during the entire range of motion
3. Position your feet approximately shoulder width apart and even with one another, i.e. neither one in front of in back of the other.
4. Stand tall with the bar gripped in a closed overhand (pronated) manner and slightly wider than shoulder width
5. Keep the wrists rigid, positioned directly under the bar and over the elbows at all times. Do not allow your wrists to hyperextend backward as this may cause an injury.
6. Take a breath as you begin to extend your arms straight up over your head and slightly to the middle of the top of your head. Moving it a bit to the rear helps prevent excessive back sway during the lift and balances out the move by keeping the body in direct alignment as the bar is pushed upward.
7. Extend the neck a little to allow passage of the bar past the face by tipping your head backward a small amount
8. Your arms will be fully extended at the top of the movement.
9. The bar will now be straight over your head and NOT out in front of your body.
10. Pause briefly at the top, maintain control of the weight, then lower it back down to near the clavicle before starting it back up again for a count of one repetition.

Indications of an Incorrect Lift

- Lack of full extension in the arms
- Uneven extension
- Bouncing at the bottom
- Leg drive to get the weight overhead and into a locked out position
- Leaning backward (Hyperextending the spinal column) as the bar is moved upward
- Failure to lower the weight to the clavicle region prior to the next lift attempt

Spotters are recommended as you perform this exercise movement.

The Squat

If you could only do one weight training exercise to promote muscle strength, tone, power, and core strength it would be hard not to choose the full squat exercise. The beauty and simplicity of the full squat is often overlooked by recreational exercisers, but most elite and pro athletes use the squat as the basis of a well-rounded weight training program.

This king of all compound exercises takes some instruction and practice to master. Incorrectly performed full squats may lead to injury so it is essential that you learn how to do a squat safely. A session with a certified personal or athletic trainer can help you gain experience and confidence when performing the squat. It is also recommended that you check with your doctor before beginning any new exercise regimen.

Use a Squat Rack
Using a squat rack improves the safety of the squat exercise. It has a full cage to catch the bar if you are unable to stand back up. Put the safety catch pins low enough so you can perform the full squat but high enough that they will prevent a total collapse of the weight onto your body should you miss the lift.

Hand Placement
Place your hands evenly on the bar to keep the bar in balance once you move out of the rack. Grip the bar with a closed grip until you are familiar enough with the holding of the bar to go to the open grip.

With your hands in the right position you should be looking directly at the middle of the bar. Duck under the bar keeping your hands in place.

Bar Position
There are two common positions for bar placement.

- The high bar: The bar rests on the top of the posterior deltoids at the base of the neck; hands just wider than shoulder width.
- The low bar: The bar rests at the lower portion of the junction of the trapezius and posterior deltoid region; hands a little wider than shoulder width. This position takes longer to learn but is well worth it in the end as it provides an excellent shelf; to hold the bar and it shortens the moment arm of the lift. Both help contribute to a higher load on the bar.

The Lifting Belt
A belt is not necessary for most people. If you become dependent on the belt you will fail to develop a strong core that is needed to correctly lift the weight in the first place. It's better to lift well within your capacities at the outset and engage those synergistic muscles than to bolster them with artificial aides early on in the training program.

Head Angle
Looking up at about a ten to twenty degree angle in front of you of will keep your head in the correct alignment for the lift to safely continue.

Back Positioning
Hold your back in a neutral to slightly arched manner. Avoid rounding in the lower back.

The Lift Movement - Stepping Out
Lift the bar off the hooks with your legs and not by extending your back. Take one small step backward followed by a second small step with the other foot. Align your feet a little wider than shoulder width apart.

The Lift Movement - The Descent
With your feet evenly spaced, take a deep breath. The descent begins with your hips moving backward, and not with your knees bending. Unhinging at the hips allows the body to drop down while still keeping the lower legs in an upright aspect relationship to the floor. It also brings into play the powerful hip flexors and extensors during the movement. You now have tremendously effective synergistic muscle activity to complete the exercise.

Practice this by standing in a doorway and holding onto the doorway with both hands. Step back one foot length away from the doorway while still holding on. Lean back onto your feet, now drop your buttocks down to the floor. If you let loose of the door, you will fall backward, but notice that your lower legs are nearly vertical in relation to the floor. This is the ideal squat position at the bottom.

The Lift Movement - The Bottom
Once at the bottom of the lift, begin moving upwards by first pushing up on the bar with your hands while at the same time extending out your chest and head. Doing this counteracts the momentum of the bar as you approached the bottom of the lift.

The Lift Movement - The Ascent
The bar is now moving and you want to keep the weight centered over the middle to back part of the foot, not on your toes. Accelerate the bar throughout the lift until you reach a point where it has to be stopped, i.e. near the end at the top. Maintain control of the bar at all times.

Return to the Rack
Take the two to three small steps back into bar hooks. Make certain you place the bar into the hooks before letting go.

Performing the full squat in the correct manner will improve your muscle mass, strength and power and is one of the overall best total body exercises you can do.